

NEWS

People with disabilities lead hundreds in a more accessible protest against police violence in Milwaukee

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Though people of color with disabilities are among the most severely harmed by police violence, they've faced barriers in participating in related protests. Organizers with disabilities set out to change that Sunday in Milwaukee.

“People with disabilities weren’t really included in the marches,” said organizer Harvey Ross. “It’s like that in society for the most part. People see us but we’re not recognized.”

The march, departing from Veterans Park, followed a route with fewer hills for those using wheelchairs and other mobility aids, who were encouraged to lead the protest in the front rows.

Rest stops along the way offered medics, water, ear plugs and other supplies. American Sign Language interpreters assisted throughout.

Noting that many people with disabilities have compromised immune systems, organizers asked participants to wear masks and stay at least 6 feet apart from others. Some masks included windows over the mouth to make it easier to read people's lips.

Before leaving the park, Atines Davis, who flew in from Maryland for the protest, taught the crowd how to sign “Black Lives Matter” in American Sign Language.

Organizers estimated over 250 people were in the crowd.

Teighlor McGee, who runs an online platform called the Black Disability Collective, said it’s the second march she has seen across the country organized specifically by people with disabilities. The first was in D.C., where video shows marchers shouting, “Sign his name” instead of, “Say his name,” in reference to George Floyd.

Ross said he wants people to understand that people with disabilities are at high risk of police violence because police are not generally educated about disabilities and may escalate situations.

"We are being policed and governed by incompetent people who can't do their jobs, so we want their resignations," Ross said.

Over 22 percent of people shot and killed by police in the U.S. since 2015 had a known mental illness, according to a Washington Post database.

The data does not indicate whether people killed had any other disabilities, though it's not hard to find examples.

In 2010 in Seattle, John Williams, a Native American woodcarver who was deaf in one ear, was carrying his carving knife and piece of wood when a police officer told him to put the knife down. Williams did not immediately respond, and the officer shot Williams multiple times.

Ross said he has felt threatened himself. He has limited mobility in his arms and legs due to a gunshot wound, and uses gloves.

"When I'm driving I have gloves on," Ross said. "I have had police officers pull me over with guns drawn like, 'Why do you have gloves on?' They're not being trained properly."

As Ross and others led marchers south onto Lincoln Memorial Drive, the group took up multiple lanes of traffic. At Michigan Street, they merged with another march fronted by Frank Nitty, who has led many protests in recent days.

Nitty told the organizers he would follow their lead and encouraged those using wheelchairs to stay in the front.

"We gonna stay behind you guys and we're gonna march with you guys wherever you're going," he said, as recorded by his livestream. "We're just here to support."

Together the two groups of hundreds of protesters marched to Red Arrow Park to remember Dontre Hamilton. Six years ago, Hamilton, who had schizophrenia, was shot 14 times by a Milwaukee police officer who had not received any specialized training on interacting with people with mental illness.

Protests after Hamilton's death were the first protests McGee, who grew up in Mequon, had ever participated in. She was 16.

“Seeing this accessible protest brings tears to my eyes,” she said on Twitter.

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